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ABSTRACT

This paper, the personal recollections of an experienced New York City public school teacher and emeritus professor of education, makes some points about "ebonics" and Black students. The paper states that when Black students in a district are assigned to special education out of proportion to their numbers, there is a fundamental problem. The paper finds that student learning depends upon teacher expectations. The paper concludes that, although schools have worked fairly well for middle class students, they have failed at educating more non-White and lower socio-economic students. It is concluded that how behavioral and academic demands are designed and implemented is the key. (NKA)

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EBONICS, STANDARD ENGLISH, AND TEACHER EXPECTATIONS

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This 800 word manuscript was sent to *The Buffalo News* on January 16, 1997 for possible publication as an op-ed article. I was given the impression the piece would be printed because *The Buffalo News* changed the data in my printed Everybody's Column letter of January 3, 1997. This manuscript was never printed.

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The Oakland Unified School District in California is the object of the latest media attention related to Black English. This time, the words *Ebonics* and genetics are also in the center of the tempest. Innumerable experts have been quoted in the media as to yea or nay in relation to generalities of what is going on rather than to the specific program in question.

The fundamental question that should be asked about the Oakland district, however, involves the administrators and teachers, students and special education. Why are 71% of the special education students black when blacks make up only 53 percent of the district? Another important question: Do most of the teachers and administrators in the district believe their black students are intelligent enough to learn standard English? Perhaps answers to these questions would provide a more accurate reason that so many black students are not learning how to speak standard English. These questions reflect teachers' perceptions of their students and teachers' expectations of student learning.

I raise this question from personal experience. I was a teacher and administrator in the New York City Public Schools for 17 years. After a rocky start, where on my first day of teaching I actually hid under my desk in fear, I realized that if I wanted to be a professional teacher, I had to change my behavior

first in order to get my students to change their behavior, and learn.

When I read that black students in a district are assigned to special education out of proportion to their numbers in the district, I see a fundamental problem. A teacher will argue that he/she is not a racist and does not see color. Yes, in many cases that is true. However, in too many cases, when that teacher gets into an uncomfortable situation with a black student -- a black male student in particular -- those unconscious, negative racial stereotypical feelings are so *reflexive* they come to the forefront and direct the teacher's behavior with that student. Indeed, these negative feelings are often used to interpret black male student language and behavior. This misunderstanding and misinterpretation of black male student language and behavior is the first step in the referral process toward special education, discipline problems, and suspension.

The fall 1995 issue of the *Journal of African American Men* published my four-year study where I asked 3,130 respondents -- 1,627 educators and 1,502 non-educators to list the stereotypical beliefs, feelings, expectations, and fantasies that the average person has about black males. This was the first non-prompted, open-ended study dealing with this taboo subject. Of the educators in the study, 27.7% specified that black males were "dumb," "ignorant," and "less intelligent" than others. Furthermore, 17.4 % of the educators responded that black males

were "uneducated". And, finally, 10 % of the educators reported black males as "unmotivated and apathetic."

Other than, perhaps, the armed forces, institutions in the United States have not come to grips with how our conscious and/or unconscious feelings about race and class affect and even direct our behavior toward one another. Teachers, sadly, receive very little assistance, if any, in their undergraduate, graduate, or in-service courses, to deal with and expunge any negative conscious or unconscious feelings related to student race and/or class. Rarely are ongoing provisions made to help teachers and administrators understand how their feelings about student race and class may affect negatively their working with an increasingly pluralistic student population.

Student learning depends in good part upon teacher expectation. Therefore, if teachers are expected to teach standard English to those students who need to learn standard English, it is important to find out whether those teachers involved believe that their black students can learn. Then weigh their responses with the district's individual school, special education, discipline, and suspension referral and assignment data.

In addition, all children, if they do not know how, should be taught how to speak, behave, and dress appropriately for the social situation. This should be

accomplished without derogating these students' ethnic, cultural, racial, class, or religious backgrounds. These children should be allowed to retain the ability to *chill* on the corner with the brothers and sisters, if they so desire, while learning how to speak, dress, and behave for business or professional success.

Finally, our schools appear to work fairly well for middle-class students. However, our schools have failed at educating more non-white and lower-socio-economic students. Indeed, with few exceptions, our schools have always failed dismally in this area. Therefore, to overcome this negative educational reality, more teachers, if they want to be considered professionals, have to first change their teaching behavior in order to encourage more of their students to change their learning behavior. Without question, this means making behavioral and academic demands. How the behavioral and academic demands are designed and implemented, is the key.